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ARC Knickerbocker Award Summary

Over the course of three weeks during the summer of 2013 I visited a number of locations in the Washington, D.C. area to complete research for my dissertation, "The Reinterpretation of National History: Museum Additions at U.S. War Memorials," thanks to the ARC Knickerbocker Award funds. Specifically, I visited the National Parks Service (NPS) Museum Resource Center in Landover, Maryland, the Library of Congress, and the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. My time in these archives contributed substantially to completion of the third chapter of my dissertation, which discusses the forthcoming Education Center to be built adjacent to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (VVM) on the National Mall.

The NPS Museum Resource Center (MRC) holds the VVM Collection, a vast archive of approximately 400,000 objects left by visitors to the VVM and catalogued by the NPS since the 1980s. A selection of these objects, representing broad categories of items collected from the memorial, will go on display at the VVM Education Center (VVMEC) once it opens to the public. NPS staff provided me with a tour of the archive and granted me guided access to it. As a result I was able to view storage methods, examine a variety of objects, and obtain information about the cataloguing process. On three separate occasions I conducted interviews with key staff members at the MRC: Duery Felton, Jr., curator of the collection (who has worked with the collection since its earliest days), Jason Bain, Senior Collections Curator for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF), Bob Sonderman, NPS Acting Regional Director and Curator of the MRC, and two NPS researchers hired by the VVMF to assist with the cataloguing and selection process for the VVMEC. Each of these individuals was able to give me first-hand information about the collection and the process behind the VVMEC that is not publicly known. During my time at the MRC I was also able to determine the ways the collection has changed over time, and how this will be reflected in the planned displays at the VVMEC.

The archives of the VVMF are held in the Manuscript Division at the Library of Congress. These archives comprise competition files for the memorial's design, organizational documents, meeting minutes, marketing material, special events programs, and correspondence, little of which has been published or is available elsewhere. I spent several days in the Manuscript Division, as these holdings provide important evidence of the framework and philosophy surrounding the campaign to build the VVM and the memorial's significance, according to the VVMF. This is especially important to my project, as I argue that the VVMEC, which will include a timeline of the war displayed near collection objects and photographs of those named on the VVM, represents a shift away from the original VVMF guidelines for the memorial, which stipulated that it make no reference to the facts of the war. In addition to this research at the Manuscript Division I interviewed VVMF founder Jan C. Scruggs, who has been the driving force behind the VVMEC. The interview with Scruggs was an essential component of my chapter on the Education Center.

Finally, I made three trips to Smithsonian's National Museum of American History (NMAH) to study the permanent exhibition "The Price of Freedom: Americans at War," which I use in my dissertation as a point of comparison. This was my first time viewing the exhibition in recent years. Although I initially intended to investigate the NMAH's research material related to "The Price of Freedom," and especially its archive on the Vietnam War, once at the museum I determined that the displays were not extensive enough to merit such background research. Instead I am corresponding with curator David K. Allison and his staff at the NMAH for further information on their methodology for the exhibition and what they hope to communicate to the visitor with it.